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Was papal plot a politbureau hit?

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What contempt they must have for us!

From the summarized report of the Italian state prosecutor, the attempted murder of John Paul II in St. Peter's Square was a work of hired assassins, aided and abetted, I quote, "by organs and institutions of the Bulgarian state."

"It is easy to see what really happened," the summary reads. "In some secret place where every secret is wrapped in another secret, some political figure of great power took note of this grave situation, and mindful of the vital needs of the Eastern Bloc, decided it was necessary to kill Pope Wojtyla."

The "grave situation" was the Polish crisis; the "secret place" was the Kremlin; the "political figure of great power" was, almost surely, Yuri Andropov, the veteran commandant of the KGB.

But the final decision to send an assassin to murder the holy father in the heart of the Eternal City was not the work of a single Kremlin subaltern. No, this was almost surely a politburo hit, signed off on by Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, and his Stalinist crony, the current chief of state of the U.S.S.R., Konstantin Chernenko.

The "evil empire," President Reagan called it. Visualizing these men seated about a table discussing who would be assigned to assassi-

nate the pope in St. Peter's Square, can anyone come up with a better phrase?

Mind-boggling is truly the precise term to describe this moral obscenity. If Brezhnev, Andropov & Co. would order the murder, in broad daylight, of the most-famous son of the Polish nation, the supreme pontiff of the Roman Catholic church, against what political, religious or cultural leader would they not strike?

Even Hitler at the pinnacle of his power in 1940, one suspects, would have recoiled — hearing the explosion — at ordering Mussolini to send Black Shirts to gun down Pope Pius XII in St. Peter's Square.

In Claire Sterling's remarkable piece, displayed front and center by *The New York Times*, the prosecutor's report was quoted directly, on the motive for the crime:

"The Bulgarian Secret Service had a specific political interest in killing John Paul II. The imposing rise of Solidarity in Poland in the

summer of 1980 and consequent social convulsions constituted a most acute crisis for the socialist states of Eastern Europe. This was perceived as a mortal danger to their political cohesion and military strategy. And, since Poland's ideological collapse was mostly due to the perfervid religious faith of the population, sustained and helped, above all, by the first Polish pope in history, the Polish rebellion might be greatly weakened and

fragmented "by this pope's physical elimination."

What does the West intend to do about it? The answer will likely be — nothing. Indeed, it was probably in confident foreknowledge that the West would confine its moral outrage to horrified backstairs whispers that emboldened the conspiracy in the Kremlin to strike the pope in the first place. Again, what contempt they must have for us!

The same week Ms. Sterling published her startling report, official

Washington was bedeviling the president on why he cannot seem to get along with Mr. Chernenko. Herewith, a sample question from President Reagan's Thursday press conference: "Sir, in recent speeches this year about the Soviets you have held out an olive branch to them, but at the same time you usually either denounce their system or their action. Would it be better, in an attempt to get this dialogue started again, whether at the summit or back in Geneva, if you simply held out the olive branch without also taking a shot at them?"

And when we "get this dialogue started again," rest assured, President Reagan will be publicly instructed not to bring up that unfortunate business about the pope — or the KAL air massacre, or Solidarity, or the terror bombing in the Panjshir Valley. Well, what can we do?

For openers, the United States might commend publicly the tenacity and courage of the Italian government, and Judge Ilario Martella, the state prosecutor, and lead the Western nations in a concerted move to expel every Bulgarian diplomat from every NATO capital. For years, the Bulgarians have gotten away, literally, with murder, with assassinating dissidents, with poisoned-tipped umbrellas, smuggling drugs and weapons in diplomatic pouches and collaborating with Western terrorists like the Red Brigade.

Perhaps we must keep open the lines of communication to the Kremlin; nothing, however, requires us to play diplomatic hosts to their triggermen.

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